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SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA FRANCE UPDATE - 06/06/06

REF: (A) Paris 2837, (B) Paris 1523, and previous

Sanofi-Pasteur Closer to Developing Vaccine

11. French pharmaceutical firm Sanofi-Pasteur recently announced the preliminary, but encouraging, results of its Phase 1 trials for a pre-pandemic H5N1 vaccine. The clinical study, involving 300 people, tested two formulations of the vaccine, one with and one without an adjuvant. The tests revealed a good response to both. The best response, however, came from a two-dose treatment of the vaccine with an adjuvant, resulting in a positive immune response in 67% of patients. This response would meet the requirements to qualify as a seasonal flu vaccine. The French Ministry of Health has ordered 1.4 million doses of this pre-pandemic vaccine.

Space Technology in Hospitals?

12. French company AirInSpace, with assistance from the European Space Agency, has adapted technology developed to protect astronauts for use in critical care centers to protect immune-deficient patients against airborne pathogens such as the avian flu virus. The technology, called the "plasmer bioprotection system" is said to completely eliminate the airborne avian flu virus by using strong electric fields and cold-plasma chambers to eliminate micro-organisms in the air. Reportedly developed in the early '90s by Russian scientists to protect cosmonauts and electronic equipment from contamination onboard spacecraft, the system was adapted by the European Space Agency and more recently by AirInSpace. The now portable technology is said to already be in use in some 70 medical centers in France and, according to French officials, could be put to use within hours to establish emergency temporary hospital facilities.

AI & Birds

13. The numbers: As of May 28, French authorities report no new cases of H5N1 in domestic poultry since February, when 11,000 Turkeys were culled in the southeastern 'departement' of France, Ain (reftel B). So far this year, 2867 birds have been tested in one of the six designated labs in France. Among these, 175 tested positive for "A type" influenza, and were sent to the national reference laboratory for additional diagnosis. The H5N1 virus was found in 63 of these cases.

14. Animal autopsies: In the event of a suspect death of a wild or domestic bird, an autopsy is conducted by the veterinary lab of the 'departement.' If the cause of mortality remains unclear, the head of the veterinary lab may decide to test for avian influenza. Samples are then sent to one of the six 'screening labs' designated by the government to search for A-type influenza. When the result is positive, samples are forwarded to the National Reference Laboratory of the French Food Safety Agency (AFSSA), located at Ploufragan in Brittany, for further testing to determine whether the bird is a carrier of the H5N1 highly pathogen virus. This process can take several days.

15. Confinement: Following AFSSA recommendations, on May 11, the GOF lifted confinement measures for domestic poultry in French territory, except for the area surrounding Ain, where the one and only outbreak of H5N1 occurred in domestic poultry in February. Poultry raisers have been instructed to protect food and water used for domestic poultry. The use of surface water for the feeding or cleaning of birds is forbidden. Gathering of poultry in markets, bird exhibits and poultry shows is now authorized. A new evaluation of the AI risk will be conducted by AFSSA before end-summer 2006 in anticipation of the fall season bird migration.

Economic Fallout

16. The Agriculture Ministry announced on June 1 that some 43

million euros have been allocated to French poultry raisers to compensate for losses incurred following the sole outbreak of AI in French poultry in February. French media noted that since mid-April, chicken prices have rebounded. Household poultry consumption reportedly increased almost 20 percent between March 27 and April 23, 2006 (as compared to the lows during February 27-March 26).

French Army to Produce Tamiflu

17. In its May 31 edition, the French medical review "le Quotidien du Medecin," announced that the Central Pharmacy of the French Armies (PCA) will launch in June 2006 a "new dosage of oseltamivir" (no details on dosage) at the request of the Health Ministry and in partnership with the Roche laboratory. This could reportedly permit the manufacture of 132 million pills at a rate of 6 million per day. If needed, 12 million per day could be produced. The article claims this is an novel initiative, as the PCA's business is to manufacture drugs that do not exist on the civilian market. (Note: It is not clear whether the French military will merely re-package pills from bulk oseltamivir stocks or will produce the medicine itself.)

Awaiting AI National Exercise Results...

18. The results of the nation-wide AI drill that took place on April 24-25 and in which the Embassy participated should be released at the end of June or in early July.

New Avian Influenza Ambassador

19. Ambassador Pierre Coulont has been appointed to replace Ambassador Jean Garbe as head of the Avian Influenza Task Force within the MFA. Ambassador Coulont is a graduate of the Saint-Cyr military academy at Coetquidan. After a military career, he entered the MFA in 1990. His most recent post - beginning in 2001 - was France's Ambassador to Botswana.

STAPLETON